CARMEN OF THE RANCHO

By FRANK H. SPEARMAN

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SYNOPSIS

Don Alfredo, wealthy, Spanish owner of a Southern California rancho, refuses to heed several warnings of a raid by a band of outlaw, Sierra Indians. One day after he has finally decided to seek the protection of the nearby mission for his wife and family, the Indians strike. Don Alfredo is killed and his two young daughters are torn from the arms of the family's faithful maid, Monica, and are carried away to the hills. Padre Pasqual, missionary friend of the family, arrives at the ruins of the ranch and learns the story of the raid from Monica. After a trying and difficult trip across the plains and mountains from Texas to California, youthful Henry Bowie, a Texas adventurer, with his friends, Ben Pardaloe and Simmie, an Indian scout, sight the party of Indians who have carried off the two little girls.

CHAPTER III—Continued

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"Now, Henry," cautioned the scout as the three walked through the pines, "don't go too fast. If them Injuns are cannibals they'd just as lief eat us as they would the other fellows . . . How many did you say they was, Simmie?"

"Around fifty; maybe a few more."

"Never mind the few. Fifty is plenty and we—three!"

"Don't worry, Ben," counseled Bowie. "They haven't got us yet."

The three Texans were seasoned in tracking and scouting. Pursuing their long way down the canyon, they scattered when nearing the war party and, after appointing a rendezvous, disposed themselves so that each could best scout for himself the camp's activities.

After a time Bowie reached the rendezvous first. Pardaloe straggled cautiously in with Simmie just behind him.

"Simmie's right," murmured Bowie. "They have two bound prisoners. They must be saved before they're knocked in the head."

The Creek was not hopeful. "One of 'em tried to set up. An Injun knocked him right over."

"Well, boys, I don't know how you feel," said Bowie, "but I'm not going to let these redskins eat two white folks. I'm going into them."

"You'll never come out, Henry," predicted the scout.

"Maybe no, maybe yes. Who can tell? What do you say, Ben?"

"I say steal a few ponies and make fast tracks away from the varmints."

"How do you feel, Simmie?"

The half-breed grinned. "I say what you say."

"Want to go in with us, Ben?" asked Bowie.

"Bound to go, are you, Henry?"

"I am."

The scout shifted his empty cheeks around mournfully on an imaginary quid. "Well, I enlisted for the expedish, Henry. Guess I'm under orders."

They discussed rapidly one plan of attack after another. All agreed that the important thing for their own welfare was a supply of horses. To take but a few of these would be to invite the savages' pursuit. The bunch, Bowie declared, must be stampeded in the melee.

"But if you stampede the ponies," said Pardaloe, "who's going to catch 'em? We'll be footin' it again."

"The only way to cover that," Bowie continued, "would be for Simmie to sneak in and hobble five of those saddled horses before the alarm's given."

"Henry's got it all laid out, Simmie," commented Ben Pardaloe skeptically.

"I don't think so much of an advance stampede," admitted Bowie. "If we clean out the Indians we'll take their horses. If they clean us out we shan't need horses. I'm depending on the night surprise and the gunfire—and the old Texas yell—long and loud. There's a moon tonight. But if signs are any good there's a better prospect for rain than moonlight."

"That suits me," grinned the Creek.

"Well, just what have we got to fight with?" asked Pardaloe.

"Enough," said Bowie. "I've got my rifle and knife and my Colt spinner. Ben, you've got your rifle, pistol and knife. Simmie's got the same. That's eleven shots before using the knives. Simmie's good for eight or ten men himself. Let's go."

CHAPTER IV

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To attack a victorious war party of fifty-odd Indians would have seemed a mad undertaking, even a century ago, to any but Texan frontiersmen — men who took long chances and relied chiefly on wit and resource to meet an emergency.

But these three men, two of them, at least, young in years though veterans in frontier fighting, canvassed the situation pretty thoroughly in their discussion. The Indians would never have stopped to camp in mid-afternoon had they not been sure that they were safe from further pursuit. They had chosen a spot easily defended and were evidently giving themselves a rest to gorge a big supper.

"You can see, Ben," said Bowie to brace up his scout, "these devils have been chased hard. They think it's all over—they think they're safe. A good noise and some shooting will scare them to death. We couldn't pick a better time. All I want is to get hold of those two prisoners and what horses we need . . . Simmie, it's time for you to start—the camp's quiet—they'll be asleep in half an hour. We'll go down together. And we must get between the Indians and the horses. If we can stampede the red devils they'll make first thing for the horses. Take your deerskin strips. Simmie, we'll have to wait till we hear from you. Give us your signals now."

"The owl," suggested Simmie.

"If it rains that's no good," objected Pardaloe. "Owls sing low when it rains."

"So do rifles with priming pans," added Bowie. "But a Colt gun works, wet or dry. And darkness doesn't help bows and arrows any."

Going over every angle of the coming encounter, and with Bowie giving directions as to how to meet every emergency he could think of, the Texans slowly and cautiously walked down the long ridge that led toward the Indian camp. The sky was already overcast, and the short southern twilight soon plunged the canyon into black night, relieved only by the two fires burning in mid-camp. Reaching a hiding point close behind the horses but overlooking the camp and well within sound of its voices, Bowie and Pardaloe disposed themselves behind a rock whence they could spring instantly into action. The half-breed stole stealthily away and was at once lost in the darkness.

Rain borne in on a west wind was beginning to spit, and the twain in hiding covered their rifle pans with the skirts of their buckskin jackets. To await in the secrecy of night a concerted signal; to attune the ears to painful alertness while trying to strain out the murmur of human voices, lest the soft coo of the false owl be lost; to watch with straining eyes every move of the milling savages as they threw themselves down to sleep—all of this kept the two Texans pitched high in anxiety. An hour must still pass before Simmie could act, and it passed fearfully slowly.

Finally Pardaloe muttered, "What's happened to Simmie?"

"I don't know what has happened to Simmie, but something has happened to the horses," whispered Bowie. "Listen!"

The neigh of a pony caused the exclamation. An answering trampling and million of the horses declared trouble to the ears of Bowie and his scout. But what was it all about? Before such a question could be asked the crack of a pistol instead of the coo of an owl caused the two to spring to their feet. The camp was already stirring.

"Hold your fire," ordered Bowie in an undertone. "Get in front of the horses, quick." The two scrambled hastily to the position they wanted and threw their rifles to their shoulders. "Take the second fellow-up," shouted Bowie. "I'll get the first." The two rifles cracked almost together.

"Yell!" cried Bowie to Pardaloe, setting a fine example himself.

Simmie ran up from behind. With an earsplitting ferocity he raised his own voice. The Indians now came on the dead run for the horses, brandishing tomahawks. The warriors were met by the bullets from two pistols and the revolver. The onslaught of the Indians proved disastrous to themselves. Simmie jumped into action with his hatchet, seconded by the fire of his companions. The savages recoiled. Bowie, dodging hatchets as best he could, ran in to where the captives lay. Here three warriors stood their ground and attacked him. Bowie, clubbing his empty rifle, laid about him. The long, heavy steel bar made a formidable weapon.

They were fighting in the fitful light of the campfires, sputtering now in the falling rain. Swinging the rifle fast and sweeping it in furious half circles, bringing it viciously down on heads and shoulders and dancing about as he dodged tomahawks, Bowie had his hands full.

He was holding his own against odds when the chief directly facing him, seeing the fight was going against him with one of his men on the ground and the other swaying drunkenly on his knees, sprang back, flung his tomahawk at Bowie's head, and quickly fitted an arrow to his bow which was slung from his shoulder. The hatchet, as Bowie ducked, caught him on the shoulder.

Despite the hard crack the Texan ran in. The Indian, a man of great size and strength, wearing a necklace of bear claws, fought the white man with his hands. In this savage Bowie realized that he had met his match. Almost instantly he found his injured right arm in the Indian's grasp, with iron fingers clutching at his throat and a second tomahawk upraised. While he struggled to free himself, his wind cut completely off, he was reduced in the fierce struggle to one defense. With a ferocious kick born of desperation the choking man caught his enemy below the belly and at the same time threw himself violently backward on the ground, landing his enemy in the embers of the nearest fire.

Screaming with pain, the savage still clung to the choking Texan, but, managing to grip his bowie knife before he lost consciousness, Bowie plunged it into his enemy's back in time to loosen the deadly fingers from his windpipe. Pardaloe ran to him, and Bowie, knife still in hand, threw off the dying enemy and staggered to his feet. Pardaloe steadied him. "He's nicked you, Henry; he's nicked you," cried the alarmed scout as his hand slipped in the blood of Bowie's shoulder.

"Not too bad," gasped Bowie, staring wildly. "Get after the rest of 'em, Ben! After 'em."

"They're cleaned out. They've run, but the varmints have got half the ponies and the other half got away."

"What now?" exclaimed Bowie, enraged. "Have we got no horses?"

"Only three that Simmie hobbled before the panther jumped 'em."

"Panther?" snapped the bewildered Texan.

"That's what started the row."

Bowie turned from the fire. He stumbled over something lying at his feet.

"It's a prisoner," he exclaimed. "And there's the other."

He bent down and inspected the nearest captive lying trussed like a wild animal. Bowie felt the body—there was breath and warmth. "Take care of the other, Ben," he said, drawing his hunting knife. "The wrists are tied so tight the flesh has swollen over the things."

Working with care, he managed to cut the thongs from the tortured wrists. The ankles were as bad. He snipped the rawhide strips that pinioned the arms and legs and

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turned the captive's face toward the fire.

"It's a child!" he exclaimed.

"So's this one," announced Pardaloe a few feet away.

Bowie shook his prisoner gently and spoke. There was no response. Yet the prisoner was breathing. He turned the head for close inspection. "It's a white child. This war party hasn't come from an Indian fight. They've raided a rancho . . . What's your name?" He spoke to the captive. A pair of large dark eyes stared in silent fear at him. He felt the clothing. His hand grasped a skirt. "By heaven, Ben, I believe it's a girl."

"Same here," said Pardaloe.

"So," said Bowie quietly, "that was their game. They've killed the rest and carried off two girls . . . What's your name?" he asked as he chafed the swollen wrists. "Tell me where you live."

There was no answer. Efforts to make the other child speak were equally fruitless.

"Well, we've got to get away from here," said Bowie finally. "These girls may be Indian, but I don't believe it. Here comes Simmie with the horses," he added. "These birds will be after us at daybreak. Let's get going."

The Texans were in strange country, but they were old in frontier ways, and they let the horses jog along, confident that they would get them out of the mountains, through the foothills and to open country if they were let alone.

Much to the relief of the refugees, the rain clouds scattered at daybreak. The air was clear and chill. The men saw dimly before them, as far as the eye could reach, a rolling country and, rising out of the morning shadows on the western horizon, a vast expanse of sea.

Bowie shouted and pointed. "The ocean, boys! The Pacific! It's California!"

There was less enthusiasm from his comrades. Simmie grinned because he was pleased with whatever pleased everybody. Pardaloe stared vacantly. His ponderous jaws moved slowly and spasmodically on an imaginary chew of tobacco.

"Ben, you don't seem enthusiastic over the new country," said Bowie. "Man alive, don't you know you're now in the land of plenty? That you're where Dan'l Boone wanted to lay his bones? Where you'll see Kit Carson after a while."

"Kit Carson?" echoed Pardaloe.

"Himself. He's out here somewheres."

"Not nigh so much of a man as his brother," declared Pardaloe casually. "Where you going to camp, Henry? I'm hungry and cold enough to eat tanbark." They were following the course of a creek and chose an open space on a high bank of the stream. "Hunt up some driftwood, Simmie," said Bowie, "and get a fire going to dry things. These youngsters will freeze if we don't get them dried out. Keep a sharp eye out for Indians, Ben. There may be a deer in that timber across the creek. I'll sneak over there myself as soon as we get the girls fixed up. Help me with this one, Simmie."

Simmie handed the child to him. Her eyes were closed. Bowie examined her as he chafed her hands. She seemed asleep. Overcome by the long strain of deadly fear and extreme fatigue, wet and weary though she was, nature had asserted itself. To awaken her now—to be sure she was only sleeping—he chafed her temples. Pardaloe, following instructions, did the same for his charge. The younger girl began to sob faintly—as if all strength had already been spent in anxiety and tears. The sobbing awakened her older sister, who slowly opened her eyes, and, as he bent over her, she looked into Bowie's face.

In spite of himself, he started. The child's eyes were dark, large, gentle, yet they came as a shock. In a brief confusion he could only realize that he had never seen such eyes. They rested on him for only a moment, then their tranquil light changed to dread, and as they closed on the face bent above her tears rolled from under the long lashes. He placed her so she could sit partially upright with her back against a small sycamore.

He worked so long with his charge that Pardaloe became impatient and, priming his rifle afresh, started off after something for breakfast.

Despite the savagely cruel treatment of the child, the ravages of distress and weeping, the frock in disarray, the disheveled hair, the scratched and bruised legs and arms, the features pitifully streaked with soil and caked with tears, something told Bowie that this youngster was not a common waif.

Pardaloe came out of the chaparral with a doe slung over his shoulder, and while Simmie started a fire, Bowie rummaged some of the Spanish loot recovered from the war party. It had been carried in a buckskin bag, and in this he found a large mug, curiously chased, and from the brawling stream below the camp he brought good water.

He had left the younger of the girls lying on the ground near the elder. On his return he found the younger lying with her head in the lap of the elder, and he imagined them sisters.

But what surprised him most was the expression of deadly fear in the eyes of the elder girl as he walked toward her, holding the cup of water in his hand. When she saw him approaching she quickly drew the little sister closer to her breast as if suspecting an effort to part them.

Bowie smiled to show his friendliness: the gesture meant nothing to the frightened stranger. With every step he took her pitiful dread increased. When he bent down on one knee and held out the water she grew hysterical, closed her eyes tight and turned her head away.

He laughed and spoke. "Don't be afraid. This is only water for you to drink."

The words drew no response. "Of course," he said to himself, "she knows no English. What can I do?"

The panic-stricken child would not look up. Bowie perceived it must be a trial of endurance. While Simmie and Pardaloe were roasting the saddle of venison at the fire Bowie sat in front of the girls, watching them and thinking. After a time he looked toward his older charge. She was stealing a glance at him. "Why be afraid?" he asked very softly. "We are your friends.

"This"—he pointed to the cup—"is water. See!" He held the cup to his lips, drank a little and poured a little on the ground.

Some advantage, he perceived, had been gained; she no longer averted her head but timidly watched him. Yet every time he held out the cup she turned her face. He could only laugh and keep trying; she was equally persistent in refusing.

Smiling, Bowie called to Simmie, "Slice off a little strip of that venison and bring it here, Simmie. Perhaps it's hunger she feels."

Again he suffered defeat. She would have none of the roasted meat held temptingly before her on the point of a stout twig. Bowie took a little bite of the meat himself to prove it was good. No signs, gestures or supplications moved his stubborn captive.

Discouraged and annoyed, Bowie walked down to where Pardaloe was finishing his ample venison breakfast. "Come over here, Ben," said Bowie testily. "See whether you can make this girl eat or drink. I can't do a thing with her."

The efforts of the tall awkward scout to make an impression were more spectacular but not more successful. His antics drew laughs from his companions but the child only quailed.

"She thinks you're crazy, Ben," murmured Simmie appraisingly.

"Hold on, boys," exclaimed Bowie suddenly. "I'll bet I've got the key to this puzzle. Stand away."

He picked up the cup of water, looked intently at the child whose searching eyes were fixed on his own, and, holding out the cup, made the sign of the cross slowly over it and put it to his lips.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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Ask Me Another

A General Quiz

The Questions

1. Why is Colorado called the Centennial state?
2. To what type of road did a Scotch engineer give his name?
3. What two great Oriental cities were founded by the British?
4. What is the most widely used word in the world?
5. What is the line that follows "Lives of all great men remind us"?
6. What is the name given to the present royal house of Italy?
7. Which of the United States has the greatest water area, California, Minnesota, or Michigan?
8. What part of the human body is divided into the right and left auricles and the right and left ventricles?
9. What was the real name of "Bonny Prince Charlie"?

The Answers

1. It was admitted into the Union in 1876, the Centennial year.
2. Macadam.
3. Hongkong and Singapore.
4. "Amen" is believed to be the most widely used word, being employed by 1,000,000,000 Christians, Jews and Mohammedans.
5. "We can make our lives sublime."
6. Savoy.
7. Minnesota.
8. The heart.
9. Charles Edward Louis Philip Casimir Stuart (1720-1788). He was also known as the "Young Pretender."

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